

## High Schools to Offer Plan to Graduate 2 Years Early

By SAM DILLON

Dozens of public high schools in eight states will introduce a program next year allowing 10th graders who pass a battery of tests to get a diploma two years early and immediately enroll in community college.

Students who pass but aspire to attend a selective college may continue with college preparatory courses in their junior and senior years, organizers of the new effort said. Students who fail the 10th-grade tests, known as board exams, can try again at the end of their 11th and 12th grades. The tests would cover not only English and math but also subjects like science and history.

The new system of high school coursework with the accompanying board examinations is modeled largely on systems in high-performing nations including Denmark, England, Finland, France and Singapore.

The program is being organized by the National Center on Education and the Economy, and its goals include insuring that students have mastered a set of basic requirements and reducing the numbers of high school graduates who need remedial courses when they enroll in college. More than a million college freshmen across America must take remedial courses each year, and many drop out before getting a degree.

"That's a central problem we're trying to address, the enormous failure rate of these kids when they go to the open admission colleges," said Marc S. Tucker, president of the center, a Washington-based nonprofit. "We've looked at schools all over the world, and if you walk into a high school in the countries that use these board exams, you'll see kids working hard, whether they want to be a carpenter or a brain surgeon."

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has provided a \$1.5 million planning grant to help the national center work with states and districts to get the program running, Mr. Tucker said. He estimated that start-up costs for school districts would be about \$500 a student, to buy courses and tests and to train teachers.

To defray those costs, the eight states intend to apply for some of the \$350 million in federal stimulus money designated for improving public school testing, Mr. Tucker said.

High school students will begin the new coursework in the fall of 2011 in Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont. The education commissioners of those states have pledged to sign up 10 to 20 schools each for the pilot project, and have begun to reach out to district superintendents.

The project's backers hope it will eventually spread to all schools in those states, and inspire other states to follow suit. Supporters include the National Association of Manufacturers and the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers' union.

Kentucky's commissioner of education, Terry Holliday, said high school graduation requirements there had long been based on having students accumulate enough course credits to graduate.

"This would reform that," Dr. Holliday said. "We've been tied to seat time for 100 years. This would allow an approach based on subject mastery — a system based around move-on-when-ready."

The new system aims to provide students with a clear outline of what they need to study to succeed, said Phil Daro, a consultant based in Berkeley, Calif., who is a member of an advisory committee for the effort.

School systems like Singapore's promise students that if they diligently study the material in their course syllabuses, they will do well on their examinations, Mr. Daro said. "In the U.S., by contrast, all is murky," he said. "Students do not have a clear idea of where to apply their effort, and the system makes no coherent attempt to reward learning."

Its backers say the new system would reduce the need for community colleges to offer remedial courses because the passing score for the 10th-grade tests would be set at the level necessary to succeed in

first-year college courses. Failure would provide 10th graders with an early warning system about the knowledge and skills they need to master in high school before seeking to enroll in college.

Currently, many high school graduates enrolling in community colleges are stunned to find that they cannot pass the math and English exams those colleges use to determine who need remediation.

Four years ago, a bipartisan panel of national education and other policy experts, assembled by the national center, recommended a far-reaching redesign of the American educational system, including the adoption of board examinations in high schools.

Other recommendations of the 2006 panel included giving states, rather than local districts, control over school financing, and starting school for most children at age 3. Mr. Tucker said the board examination project was the broadest effort at putting the panel's proposals into effect so far.

"One hope is that this board exam system can prepare students to move on to careers, to higher ed and technical colleges and the workplace, sooner rather than later," said Howard T. Everson, a professor of educational psychology at the City University of New York, who is co-chairman of the advisory committee.

In that respect, the effort is similar to the growing early college high school movement, in which students begin taking college-level courses while they are still in high school and earning college credit through nearby community colleges.

States that participate in the pilot project on board examinations will pick up to five programs of instruction, with their accompanying tests, for use by the participating high schools. Those programs already approved by the national center include the College Board's Advanced Placement, the International Baccalaureate Diploma, ACT's QualityCore and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education programs offered both by Cambridge International and by Edexcel, part of Pearson Education.